

CHICKEN RANCHING

An account of early days on one of the
first chicken ranches, the J.J. KING Ranch
at 3820 Bodega Avenue, West Petaluma.

...as remembered by the daughter of

John J. King, Bertha King Praetzel.

August 1990

My earliest memories of chickens dates to about about 1912 when, as a child of 5 years I watched my father taking the baby chicks from the boxes in which the local hatchery had shipped them and placing them on clean straw in what was called the brooder house ... there was an umbrella-like cover over a small heating unit where the baby chicks ran to huddle in the warmth, much like nesting beneath mother hens' outspread wings. These brooder houses were divided into two sections. As the chicks eventually strayed from the warmth of the stove they went in to the cooler room where they found food and water. After a few weeks they were ready for the second stage which was called the pullet house. This was a much larger building without heat. It had low, off the floor roosts where the growing chicks soon climbed, rested during the day and slept at night. There were doors which opened to the outside where the pullets were fed and could scratch in the ground. Alongside of the indoor section nests were placed and soon we found very small eggs. As children we loved those for coloring our Easter Eggs. The next move was to the chicken houses. This building was wide enough for a horsedrawn wagon ~~wagon~~ to go though, dirt in the center, high off the ground roosts on one side and low nests on the opposite side. The chickens spent most of the day outside scratching in the dirt, coming in to lay their eggs and roost at night.

As children of 10 and 12 years it was our job to gather the eggs in a big basket which held about 150 eggs. The baskets were brought to the building where the eggs were sorted as to size and placed in egg cases ready for shipment. The dirty eggs had to be washed. This was children's work and we hated it because only cold water could be used. Okeh in the summer but miserable in the winter.

The chickens were well fed. Acres of kale had to be planted and when matured the heavy outside heavy leaves were picked and run through an electrically operated cutter and tossed in to a huge mixing machine with finely mashed grains and horsemeat. Having such a diet the hens produced an egg with a deep yellow yolk and whites which we never see in today's eggs. When the New York market discovered that the deep yellow yolk was evidence that the hens had been fed horsemeat a howl went up that was heard all the way back to Petaluma. Consequently the chickens were no longer fed a meat diet. Eventually the poultrymen bought the ready mixed food by the sack and the backbreaking job of picking kale ended too.

Outside labor was employed for some of the heavier work such as roost cleaning and house spraying with disinfectants.

But the egg gathering, packing and washing was usually done by members of the family.

At the peak of my father's poultry business he had 10,000 laying hens. It was at this time that an Egg Laying Contest was conducted by the poultry department of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau in Cooperation with the College of Agriculture of the University of California.

My father entered his hens. He had no breeding formula but was very knowledgeable as to the proper bone structure of a good laying hen. He picked the hens from the random flock. Putting these hens against the finely bred stock of competitors, his hens won first prize. He was given a large silver cup with the following inscription: "1st Prize Pen -- 1920-1921 -- Sonoma Co.. Farm Bureau Egg Laying Contest at Petaluma, Cal. Awarded for Highest Record Made by 10 hens in 364 days". This cup was later presented to the Petaluma Historical Museum by David King Jr. in 1989.

Apparently the news of this contest was printed in the farm magazines, Grange News and other newspapers because my father soon was receiving letters from various parts of the United States offering as much as \$5.00 for a dozen eggs. In as much as the hens were not individually caged he could not honestly take advantage of such offers. Just about this time a terrible disease called Newcastles hit the ranch and I recall wagons loaded with dead chickens being picked up daily. This called for vaccination of the entire stock, an expensive and time consuming operation. My father finally became discouraged and started dabbling in the real estate business specializing in dairy, poultry and country property. For a short time he conducted the business from home. Later he opened an office at Kings corner a section of the property he owned at the corner of Bodega Avenue and Thompson Lane. He finally gave up completely on chicken ranching and established his real estate and insurance business on Kentucky Street in Petaluma known as the J.J. King Agency. This was in 1926 and the business is still being conducted by his son, John J. King the Third, (1990). The original John J. King came to the ranch as an immigrant from the Azores Islands in 1870.

PETALUMA HISTORICAL MUSEUM
Oral History Program

Conditional Release Agreement

For and in consideration of the participation by the Petaluma Historical Museum in any programs involving the dissemination of ~~tape-recorded~~ memoirs and oral history material for publication, copyright, and other uses, I hereby release all right, title, or interest in any and to all of my ~~tape-recorded~~ memoirs to the Petaluma Historical Museum subject to the following stipulations:

above is in reference to the following only:

"Chicken Ranching, an account of early days on one of the first chicken ranches, the G. J. King Ranch at 3820 Bodega Ave., West Petaluma, as remembered by the daughter of John J. King, Bertha King Pratzel -

PLACE Petaluma

DATE 8-31-90

Bertha M. Pratzel
(Interviewee)

Patrice Dorsay
(for the Petaluma Historical Museum)

PETALUMA HISTORICAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
Oral History Program
Narrator Personal Information Questionnaire

Name Praetzel Bertha Marie King
Last First Middle (Maiden)

Address 3820 Bodega Ave
Petaluma, Ca. 94952

Marital status: Married Single Divorced Widowed X

Birthdate Apr. 19 -07 Birthplace Petaluma, Cal.

Length of residence in Petaluma (or Sonoma County) Lifetime

Education: Elementary school St. Vincent's Academy

Secondary school St. Vincent's Grad Jr.

College Sweet's Business College Grad 1923

Other _____

Occupation(s) or former occupations(s) Secretary Pet. Water Co.
Insurance & Real Estate Business, Owner-Praetzel's
Fine Furniture

Travels Europe- From Amsterdam to Portugal
Trips 1964, 1967, 1969
1972, 1978

Organizations, clubs _____

Other special interests _____

Additional comments _____

THANK YOU!

Obituaries

Aug 26

10-26-93

of 20 and the great-grandmother of 12.

Interment was at Calvary Cemetery. The family prefers donations be made to the St. Vincent de Paul Church Capital Campaign, 35 Liberty St., Petaluma 94952, or to Hospice of Petaluma, 415 A St., Petaluma 94952.

Bertha Marie King Praetzel

A funeral mass was held Monday for Bertha Marie King Praetzel, a third-generation Petaluma descendant of Gold Rush pioneers, who died Oct. 22 at the age of 86.

Mrs. Praetzel grew up on the King Ranch in Wilson District, attended St. Vincent School and was a graduate of Sweet's Business College in Santa Rosa. She worked in her father's Petaluma real estate office until her marriage to Desmond Praetzel in 1931.

A devoted wife and mother, "Bert" founded a successful furniture business called the Ranch Storehouse — now Praetzel's Fine Furniture — in the early 1950s. She became known throughout the Bay Area as an astute businesswoman.

In her retirement years, Mrs. Praetzel became an active volunteer worker at local convalescent homes, initiated weekly devotionals and left a legacy of service and love with each patient.

She was a member of St. Vincent Catholic Church.

Mrs. Praetzel was the mother of Marie Smith of Berkeley, Carol Cunningham of Mill Valley, Michael Praetzel of Bellingham, Wash., Nancy McGunagle of Petaluma, Paul Praetzel of Petaluma and Jerry Praetzel of Big Arm, Mont. She was the sister of Josephine Traversi and John King of Petaluma and Clarence Lee King of Novato, the grandmother